

Innovative Intelligence Support

The Transition to President Johnson

John Helgerson

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The transition to President Johnson was abrupt for the US Intelligence Community as it was for the rest of the country. In some respects, it was also as uncertain. Johnson had received a number of intelligence briefings as Chairman of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee, and later as Senate Majority leader. He had met on one occasion with Allen Dulles in July 1960 while a vice-presidential candidate, but neither Dulles nor his successor, John McCone, had paid much attention to keeping Johnson informed during the intervening years.

Johnson, in turn, had paid little attention to the products of the Intelligence Community while he was Vice President. Each day his office received the Agency's *Current Intelligence Bulletin*, a widely distributed product that contained less sensitive and less highly classified information than was included in the *President's Intelligence Checklist*. Although the *Checklist* at the end of the Kennedy presidency was being sent also to the Secretaries of Defense and State and to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Johnson was unaware of its existence. For reasons undoubtedly growing out of the earlier political rivalry between Kennedy and Johnson, McGeorge Bundy's deputy, Bromley Smith, early in the Kennedy

presidency had ordered that “under no circumstances should the *Checklist* be given to Johnson.”¹

On Saturday morning, 23 November 1963, the day following Kennedy's assassination, DCI John McCone instructed his Executive Assistant, Walter Elder, to telephone Johnson's secretary and inform her that he would be at the White House at 9:00 a.m. as usual to give the President the regular morning intelligence briefing.² In reality, there was nothing usual or regular about the DCI's involvement in a morning briefing, but McCone obviously believed he needed to take an extraordinary initiative to establish a relationship with the new President.

McCone was waiting in Bundy's office in the basement of the West Wing when the President entered at approximately 9:15. Johnson had been an infrequent visitor to those quarters, which also include the White House Situation Room, but he was forced to come there for the meeting because Kennedy's office had not yet been cleared out. R. J. Smith, CIA's Director of Current Intelligence, was present and talked briefly with Johnson in Bundy's outer office, writing later that “he looked massive, rumpled, and worried.”³

A Good Start

Despite the irregular and strained nature of the circumstances, McCone accomplished his mission during that first meeting with President Johnson. The President

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expressed his confidence in McCone, who, in turn, reassured the new President that he and the Agency stood ready to support him in every way. McCone introduced the President to the *Checklist* and reviewed with him the unspectacular substantive items in the publication that day. Johnson had few questions during their 15-minute session, but he did agree that McCone should brief him personally each morning, at least for the next several days. The President asked that the Director bring any urgent matters to his attention at any time, day or night.

The *Checklist* shown to Johnson on that first occasion was a bulky publication containing five unusually long items and six additional notes. R. J. Smith explained to Bromley Smith that the Agency tried to provide, as unobtrusively as possible, a bit of extra background for Johnson. Bromley Smith approved the strategy but added that he hoped the Agency would not be too obvious in its tutorials. In his memoirs, Johnson wrote of his relief to discover "on that sad November morning" that the international front was peaceful and that there was nothing in the material McCone brought to him that required an immediate decision.⁴

McCone met with Johnson almost every day for a two- to three-week period, briefing him on virtually all the world's trouble spots. At these meetings, the President urged the director to ensure that CIA was providing the FBI all information and support appropriate to its investigation of the background of President Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. McCone in turn provided Johnson information available in CIA files on Oswald.

McCone also used these opportunities to inform the President of a variety of CIA covert action and technical collection programs, including the successful effort to build what became known as the SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft to augment the U-2. McCone brought the President up to date on the status of the program (by that time a number of aircraft had been built) and to brief him on an exchange that McCone had with President Kennedy about the advisability of surfacing the program publicly. Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara had urged Kennedy to make a public announcement of the aircraft's existence, and Kennedy was inclined to do so.

Upon hearing a discussion of the political and security issues involved, however, Johnson decided to postpone any public announcement of the program, at least until the following spring (in fact, the President revealed the existence of the aircraft at a press conference in February 1964). In the meantime, he ordered McCone to get as many aircraft produced and deployed to the operating site as possible.

Vietnam

The most significant issue Johnson and McCone discussed during this period undoubtedly was Vietnam. McCone was straightforward in providing the Agency's analysis of the course of war there. Initially, this won him points with the new President, who had not favored certain of the steps taken in Vietnam by his predecessor, but it was to lead ultimately to a falling out between McCone and Johnson.

On 24 November, two days after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson

met at 3:00 p.m. in the Executive Office Building with Rusk, McNamara, George Ball, Bundy, McCone, and Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge. According to McCone, Lodge informed the group that the United States had not been involved in the recent coup against President Diem.⁵ In fact, Lodge had instructed that South Vietnamese generals be made aware that the US Government had lost confidence in Diem and was kept aware of the events before and during the coup on 1 November. During the course of the military takeover, Diem was captured and then killed.

Lodge maintained that the popularization of South Vietnam was happy as a result of the coup, showing the group some pictures of crowds in Saigon. Lodge argued that the change in government had been an improvement and that he was hopeful about the course of the war, expecting "marked progress" by February or March 1964. He also stated, without elaboration, that there were indications that North Vietnam might be interested in some unspecified arrangements that would be satisfactory to the United States. McCone wrote in his memorandum for the record that Lodge's statements were "optimistic, hopeful, and left the President with the impression that we were on the road to victory."

McCone registered with the group a much more pessimistic CIA assessment. He cited the continuing increase in Viet Cong activity over the previous month, predicting additional sustained guerrilla pressures. The Director pointed out that the South Vietnamese military was having considerable trouble organizing

the government and was receiving little help from civilian leaders, who seemed to be staying on the sidelines. McCone said the Intelligence Community could not give an optimistic appraisal of the future.

Johnson stated that he approached the situation in Vietnam with misgivings and was anxious about voices in the Congress calling on the United States to get out. He was particularly doubtful that the United States had taken the right course in upsetting the Diem regime, although he recognized it was a fait accompli with which he would have to live. The President included in his remarks some harsh criticisms about the divisions within US ranks about the conduct of the war. He made clear that he wanted to replace several key figures in the US country team in Saigon and dictated that he "wanted no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering, and any person that did not conform to policy should be removed."

Asking for Advice

When McCone saw the President on the following days for their discussions of the daily *Checklist*, the President regularly raised the question of Vietnam. Despite his comments about differences of opinion, he appeared to appreciate the fact that McCone's assessment did not correspond to what he was hearing from others. The President repeatedly asked for the Director's appraisal of the situation, but the continuing exchange between the two ultimately proved troublesome for the Director. In large part, this was because Johnson sought McCone's advice on the sensitive issue of who should "run the show"

in South Vietnam and discussed his thoughts on possible impending personnel changes among his advisers and ambassadors.

Johnson remarked to McCone that, although he appreciated the work the DCI was doing in intelligence, he did not want him to confine himself to that role. The President invited the Director to come to him personally with suggestions for courses of action on policy that McCone thought wise, even if his ideas were not consistent with the advice others were providing. Johnson mentioned specifically that he was not satisfied with the advice he was receiving on nuclear testing, Cuba, and South Vietnam. Regarding the latter, the President again questioned McCone about the real future in South Vietnam, underscoring his desire for an "objective appraisal." The President specifically asked for any recommendations that the DCI might have for modifying Vietnam policy.

Johnson's confiding in McCone during the first two weeks of his presidency clearly flattered the CIA Director but also put him in an awkward position with other key players in the government, as well as with his obligation as DCI to provide objective intelligence assessments. Within months, events were to reveal that McCone probably took the President more literally than he should have. The Director's candor in providing advice to the President eventually led to a strained relationship.

The Cuba Problem

The President was not so completely preoccupied with Vietnam that he

did not remember to focus on another enduring problem—the Castro regime in Cuba. Within a week of becoming President, he asked McCone how effective US policy was regarding Cuba and what the CIA projected to be the future of that country. Johnson was especially interested in the effectiveness of the economic embargo of Cuba and wanted to know what the Agency planned to do to dispose of Castro.

The President said he did not want any repetition of "the fiasco of 1961," but he felt the Cuban situation was one with which the United States could not live and regarding which the CIA needed to propose a more aggressive strategy. Johnson informed McCone that he looked to the CIA for firm recommendations.

Meetings and Briefings

Initially, it was unclear whether Johnson would return to a system of regular NSC meetings or continue the more casual Kennedy approach. There was, therefore, much interest in the NSC meeting that the President called for 5 December 1963. At that meeting, McCone was to brief the group on the Soviet military and economic situation. He prepared thoroughly for this first NSC meeting with the new President, bringing one assistant, Clinton Conger, and a number of large briefing charts to the meeting.

To McCone's surprise, Johnson had invited to the meeting the chairmen and ranking minority members of the leading Congressional committees. The Director accommodated this novel approach by quickly briefing the Congressional leaders on the

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fact of, and restrictions related to, communications intercepts, which were to be mentioned during the briefing. Just as the meeting began, however, there was another surprise when the President gave a nod and in came his White House photographer. McCone was aghast as the photographer began shooting pictures left and right. He turned around with a start to confirm that Conger had managed to turn over a map of Soviet ICBM sites before the first pictures were taken of that end of the room.

In the subsequent months, it was to become clear that Johnson was no more enamored of weekly NSC meetings than Kennedy had been. When such meetings were held, however, they normally began with an intelligence briefing presented by McCone.

Eroding Confidence

With few formal NSC meetings, thus providing few opportunities for formal CIA briefings, much of the Agency's relationship with the new President came to rest on the briefings McCone was providing Johnson privately. Unfortunately, these soon became a casualty of the differences emerging between the two men regarding Vietnam.

The momentum of McCone's contacts with Johnson was interrupted by a trip the Director took in December 1963 to review the Vietnamese situation. It was his second trip to Saigon since becoming DCI, and McCone was discouraged by what he found. His pessimism led him to be skeptical of proposals McNamara had made for an extended program of clandestine raids against North

Vietnam in early 1964. During a subsequent trip to Vietnam in March 1964, McCone's reservations deepened, and he concluded that the war effort, even with McNamara's enhancements, was not succeeding.

McCone recommended to the President a six-point program to reverse the deteriorating situation. It was a program that would involve escalation significantly beyond anything considered by McNamara and Johnson. Johnson refused to accept the DCI's recommendations. As the President came to side with McNamara's approach to the conduct of the war, he became increasingly impatient with McCone and with the continuing differences between the DCI and the Secretary of Defense. By the end of March 1964, Johnson clearly had lost confidence in McCone and interest in his regular intelligence updates. In the succeeding months McCone attempted periodically to restart his briefings of the President, at least on an occasional basis, but Johnson turned him aside.

In June 1964, the Director informed the President for the first time that he would like to resign as soon as Johnson had decided on a successor.⁶ Despite his growing disenchantment with McCone, Johnson insisted that he remain in his post until after the presidential election in November 1964.

Evolution to the President's Daily Brief

Providing the *Checklist* to President Kennedy had worked so well that CIA naturally hoped the arrangement would continue with Johnson, but this was not to be. In his first weeks as President, Johnson read the *Checklist* and seemed interested in discussing its contents during his meetings with McCone. After those meetings stopped, however, Johnson tended not to read the daily publication.

Observing that Johnson was no longer reading the *Checklist*, Brig. Gen. Chester Clifton (who had stayed on from the Kennedy Administration as military aide to the President) proposed the idea of a twice-weekly intelligence report. CIA managers thought this strategy was worth a try. In truth, they thought that anything that would catch the President's eye was worth a try; several formats were offered during this period. They had been dismayed by Bromley Smith's assessment that Johnson was probably disinclined to read the *Checklist* because he regarded it as Kennedy's publication. He was still smarting because he had not been permitted to receive it as Vice President.

On 9 January, the first issue of the semiweekly *President's Intelligence Review* was taken to Clifton at the White House. The next morning Clifton called current intelligence specialist Richard Lehman at CIA to report that he had shown the new publication to the President at breakfast and it had "worked like a charm." At the end of January, Clifton again made a point of seeking Johnson's reaction to the *Intelligence Review*. The President observed at

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that point that he found it a valuable supplement to the intelligence briefings he received and wanted the publication to continue without change.

Although the President read primarily the semiweekly review, his staff requested that the *Checklist* continue to be published on a daily basis to enable them to answer the President's frequent spur-of-the-moment questions. With the President not reading the *Checklist* most days, McCone decided he would expand its readership; he obtained permission to send it to four additional officials in the State Department, two more in Defense and in the Joint Chiefs, and to the offices of the Secretary of Treasury and the Attorney General.

The practice of producing two Presidential intelligence publications worked well through the election year of 1964. The President typically read the *Review* on the return leg of campaign trips, and his staff felt well supported with the daily *Checklist*. As the election neared, however, Secretary of State Rusk expressed to McCone his concern about the security of the *Checklist* as a result of its expanded dissemination. Rusk was worried about possible leaks regarding sensitive policy issues during the campaign. The DCI was more concerned about the basic question of whether it made any sense to publish a "Presidential" *Checklist* when the President himself almost never read it, but agreed something should be done.

Meanwhile, during the 1964 electoral campaign Johnson's opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, set a precedent by declining to receive intelligence briefings. In July, after consulting with the President, McCone had

telephoned Goldwater to offer customary briefings. According to Elder, Goldwater replied only that he would consider it. Within hours, an assistant called to decline, explaining that the Senator appreciated the offer but felt he had all the information he needed to conduct his campaign. McCone, reflecting a frustration he and Johnson shared, mused "he probably does; the Air Force tells him everything he wants to know."

Responding to the concerns of the Secretary of State and the DCI about the circulation of the *Checklist*, R. J. Smith proposed that the most graceful way for the Agency to drop a number of the readers of the *Checklist* would be to discontinue the publication and produce a new one. Smith observed that the Agency would maximize the likelihood that Johnson would accept a new publication and read it regularly if it were produced to conform as much as possible to his work habits. Because Johnson did much of his reading at night, in bed, Smith recommended that the publication be published and delivered in the late afternoon as the *Review* had been, rather than in the morning like the *Checklist*. Smith's proposal was accepted, and after the election both the *Checklist* and the *Review* were dropped.

Gaining Acceptance

The new *President's Daily Brief* (PDB) designed specifically for

President Johnson, was delivered to the White House on 1 December. Its fresh appearance obviously appealed to the President. His assistant, Jack Valenti, sent the first issue back to Bundy with word that the President read it, liked it, and wanted it continued. Quite apart from the packaging of the current intelligence, President Johnson, like other presidents, was becoming a closer reader of the daily products as he became increasingly enmeshed in foreign policy matters. By mid-February 1965, for example, he was reading not only the PDB but also CIA's daily Vietnam situation report. Bromley Smith insisted it be delivered at 8:00 a.m. each day so that it could be sent to the President early.

In early 1965, Johnson agreed that the time had come for McCone to return to the private sector. That understanding undoubtedly was furthered by a letter the Director delivered to Johnson on 2 April in which the Director argued against an expanded land war in Vietnam and concluded that US bombing was ineffective.⁷ By coincidence, the day that McCone passed the directorship of CIA to his successor, Adm. William Raborn—28 April—was also the day US Marines landed in the Dominican Republic to deal with the crisis there. It was during the Dominican crisis that word was received that the PDB had taken firm root in the White House. Presidential spokesman Bill Moyers said on 21 May, approximately six months after the PDB had been launched, that the President read it "avidly."

The PDB process that was in place in early 1965 continued more or less unchanged throughout the Johnson Administration. CIA did not receive from Johnson the steady presidential

feedback that it had received from Kennedy. The Agency knew, however, that the President was reading the PDB regularly, and Johnson's aides, usually Bromley Smith, were consistently helpful in passing back the President's reactions, criticisms, and requests. The only significant change made in the PDB process came when the President again reversed himself and indicated he wanted to receive the PDB early in the morning rather than in the evening. He had decided that he wanted to see the PDB at 6:30 a.m., before he began reading the morning newspapers.

Those newspapers later provided conclusive evidence that the publication was reaching the President. Agency personnel were surprised one morning to see a photograph in the papers showing the President and Mrs. Johnson sitting in the White House in dressing gowns. Mrs. Johnson was holding their first grandson while the President was reading a copy of the *President's Daily Brief*.

NOTES

1. Richard Lehman. Interview by the author in McLean, Va., 10 March 1993.
2. Walter Elder. Interview by the author in McLean, Va., 21 April 1993.
3. R. J. Smith. *The Unknown CIA*; Washington; Pergamon-Brassy's; 1989; p.163.
4. Lyndon Johnson. *The Vantage Point*; New York; Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1971; p.22.
5. John McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "South Vietnam Situation," 25 November 1961.
6. Elder interview, 21 April 1993.
7. *Ibid.*